Journal of Identity and Migration Studies
Volume 15, number 2, 2021

Home and Sense of Belonging in the Life Stories of First and Second Generations of Latvian Exiles[1]

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Abstract. In the end of Second World War many Latvians found refuge in the western countries defining themselves as an exile community. When Latvia regained its independence, the exile was officially put to an end, however, most part of exiles did not return. Hence, the question arises: how different generations of exile Latvians define their attachment to their homeland and to their host countries? The study is based on the analysis of the life story interviews gathered at the Latvian National Oral History Collection. In general, these life stories are consistent with the observation that the ability to rebuild homes does not deny the importance of territorial identity; instead, it highlights the different ways in which homes and mobility can interact with each other (Murcia 2019). As evident from the experience of both first- and second-generation exiles, homes, even for those for whom they are fixed in a particular place, are dynamic – associated with changes in time and space, attitudes, and feelings of belonging. As a result, some are neither separated from the place left in the past, nor really integrated into the current place, while others form a connection to all the places they have inhabited during their life.

Keywords*: forced migration, exile, home, place identity, life stories, memory*

Introduction

In the result of the Second World War, Latvia not only lost its statehood, but also several hundred thousand of its inhabitants. Part of them lost their lives in wartime conditions and under the Soviet and Nazi occupying regimes, others were deported to Siberia while still others fled to the west fearing the return of Soviet rule and further repressions. At the end of the war, most part of the refugees who had reached west (approximately 150.000–200.000 people) did not consider it possible to return to the Latvian Soviet Socialist Republic, but instead found refuge in the different host countries (the Unites States, Great Britain, Australia etc.), defining

[1] The research is funded by the University of Latvia project "Critical thinking, innovation, competitiveness and globalization" (project No. AAP2016/B033).

themselves as an exile community with a common goal of fighting communism, working for the restoration of independent Latvia, preserving Latvian culture abroad and transmitting this culture to the future generations.[2] Along with this common goal, Latvians in exile were united by memories of life in pre-war Latvia, leaving home and settling in their new host countries. These aspects allow them to be defined as a certain community of memories, namely, a group of people whose members feel connected to each other because they are united by a common direct experience (Irwin-Zarecka 1994, 47). Alternately, they can be considered as an imagined community, that is, "a community based not so much on geography or circumstance as on sets of meanings, symbols and even literary fictions that it has in common and that enable its members to recognise and converse with each other with a sense of mutual belonging (Hoffman 2005 as cited in Pickering and Keightley 2012, 127).

Over time, exile Latvians adapted to the new conditions and successfully integrated into the societies of their host countries. Nevertheless, many of them did not forget the above-mentioned common goals, preserved their Latvian identity and passed it on to the next generations. When Latvia regained its independence in 1991, the exile was officially put to an end, as Latvians finally had the opportunity to return home. However, most often it turned out that 50 years had been too long and people were too settled down to return. In addition, the question arose – what is/was the place that these people considered their home?

Exile, which is a specific form of migration, is most often characterized by a sedentary, never-ending attachment to the lost place and land as a source of identity and the only home. But is this the only thing we can hear in the life stories of Latvians in exile? And is it true to assume that the question "where is my home" is often more complicated and also more acute not for those who have experienced migration themselves (i.e., the first generation in exile), but for those who have inherited it (i.e., the second and next generations) (Stock 2017, 1)? These are the issues that will be addressed in the article, based on the analysis of the life story interviews with the exile Latvians of different generations gathered at the Latvian National Oral History (NOH) Collection[3]. Each of these life story interviews "reports on individual and

[2] As noted by researchers of different exile communities, in such way the recent refugees "could possibly seclude themselves from losing a sense of control over their future, as their lives took turn for the unknown" (Sznajder and Roniger 2009, 29).

[3] NOH collection at the Institute of Philosophy and Sociology of the University of Latvia aims at documenting the living, unexplored experience of the nation's people in recent historical events. The collection was started in 1992 and now consists of over 4,700 audio-recorded life

personal life events, but, when viewed in larger numbers, allows us to see the whole generation, historical era or geographical location" (Bela-Krūmiņa 2004, 529). In addition, such type of biographical sources is able to reveal "what significance events have played in people's lives, how deep their emotional impact is, how one is aware of what has happened and how one expresses oneself and one's identity" (Zirnīte 2011, 204). In order to place the experience of exile Latvians in a broader context, the first part of the article explores such concepts as home and place identity in direct connection with the issues of migration, refugees and exile.

The concept of home (homeland) in relation to (forced) migration

The refugee studies have paid a great deal of attention to the fact that refugees long intensely for their place of origin or "paradise", the loss or absence of which entails a negative experience (Ezrahi 1992, 465). Psychologist and refugee researcher Renos K. Papadopoulos has also pointed out that the only common feature of every refugee, no matter where or when they come from, is not the trauma but the loss of a home, which is not only physical but also psychological experience (Papadopoulos 2002, 9).

There has been a much scholarly discussion on the concept of home within the disciplines of sociology, anthropology, psychology, human geography, history, architecture and philosophy (see, e.g., Douglas 1991, Mallet 2004). If summarizing, home, which in context of forced migrants and exiles are commonly equated to homeland, is not just a physical building or place, but also a space of belonging, intimacy, security, interpersonal relationships and self-confidence (Liu 2014, 19). It is a highly packed signifier that encompasses both place and concept and brings together memories and longings, spatialities and temporalities, immediate family and long-dead ancestors, the local and the global, physical sensations with the intangible and that which is impossible to put into words (Markowitz 2004, 23).

Home is also an important part of one's identity, or, more precisely, place identity. Place identity, which was introduced as a concept by environmental

stories, several written memoirs, and numerous video recordings. Part of the collection consists of interviews recorded with Latvians abroad – mainly in the United States, but also in Great Britain, Sweden, Norway, Germany and Australia. These interviews are aimed at documenting the experience of both post-Second World War exiles and recent economic emigrants. (For further information see www.oralhistory.lv)

psychologists in the late 1970s, is defined as "a potpourri of memories, conceptions, interpretations, ideas, and related feelings about specific physical settings, as well as types of settings" (Proshansky 1978, as cited in Qazami 2014, 307). At the same time, it is also an active process during which people, by spatially interacting, define themselves by belonging to a certain place. In other words, the place identity is a component of personal identity that develops according to the elements that are typical of a particular area and the activities that have occurred there (Hernandez et al. 2007, 311).

In accordance with above mentioned, the concept of home – along with identity and a sense of belonging as potential synonyms – is one of the possible meeting points of different migration paradigms (Vukušic 2011, 67), as the psychological, emotional and existential connection with home is felt more acutely by migrants who have experienced departure (also forced migration or flight) and entry (arrival in the new place of residence) as the turning points or their lives or breaks in their personal biographies. As migration itself involves a polarity between home and absence, given the uncertainty surrounding the possibility or impossibility of returning home, the home or homeland becomes a kind of sacred place in the lives of migrants, but especially for refugees/exiles, namely, they are places that function as a kind of *perpetuum mobile*, giving them the driving force to maintain their identity (ibidem, 70).

Sense of home in the life stories of exile Latvians

The notion of a (lost) sacred place can also be heard in the life stories of the NOH collections, especially when exiles talk about returning (even temporarily) to their homeland and/or home, e.g.:

> When I returned for the first time to my hometown (it was in 1992) – I didn't recognize anything there anymore. Not even the path we walked. I only found the foundations of our house. Around the place where my bed was standing back then, there was a spruce tree. Some cones had fallen, or the squirrels had dropped them. I took three cones – that was all left from my father's house. [...] I don't want anything elsewhere – I want the place where I was born, where I grew up, which belonged to my ancestors. From generation to generation, as far as I know, my

> ancestors had lived there. For that I love my country, my homeland. That is my homeland.[4]

During the 50 years of the exile the particular sacred place has physically disappeared, but the nostalgic attachment to this place, which has belonged to respondent's family for generations and is now embodied in three spruce cones, has not disappeared. Instead, the loss of a home in this, as in many other cases, has become a conscious and even central part of the exile's personal identity (Sznajder and Roniger 2009, 29).

The aggravated relationship between oneself and home can be clearly heard in the life story of a woman, who left Latvia as a child and have lived most of her life in Great Britain:

> Maybe it's very sentimental, but I feel at home in many countries, however, at the same time, I don't feel at home anywhere. And Latvia is also included there. Because always, if I'm in some country, I want to enjoy the way those people live there. I'm enjoying in with my heart and soul, you might say. But as I say, in all those countries and even in Latvia I feel like a stranger.

In the further course of her life story, the woman also points out that for a long period of her life she has felt lost, because "something was missing in my life and dragged me back [to Latvia]; probably because I had fond memories of the people I loved and who I didn't meet anymore". In general, this life story, like many others, shows that quite a few of exile Latvians truly feel "homeless" or, one might say, as living on the threshold between memories of home/homeland and the real life in their host countries, unable to take a step forward (assuming their host country as a real home), not really back (returning to Latvia). In other words, they constantly fluctuate between the past in the homeland and the present in the host country (Sznajder and Ronigen 2009, 19).

The quoted life story also points to another important nuance, namely, that home does not necessarily have to be interpreted in spatial or geographical categories and is never a place *per se*, but rather the relationship that an individual has established with a place. Respectively, although people may be attached to certain places, the feeling of home can also be caused by other processes: being with certain people, certain social conditions or imaginary communities, as well as daily

[4] Here and below are quotes from life story interviews from the Latvian National Oral History Collection.

routines or specific objects (Stock 2017, 30). Accordingly, the exiles' longing for Latvia was largely related not only to a specific geographical location, but also to the remaining connections with relatives and friends whose presence or lack of it is most closely linked to their ability to feel at home somewhere.

An important feature of the concept of home in the context of migration especially in the context of biographical approach used in this particular study, is its connection with stories. On the one hand, home is closely linked to identity, especially from a narrative perspective, which presume that identity is expressed through stories. Namely, by telling stories about their homes and lives, people locate themselves in the present by considering past experiences and future directions as significant for their current situation (Stock 2017, 38). On the other hand, as stated by Renos Pappadopoulus, stories of lost homes play an important role in the existence of refugee (exile) communities, as they allow individuals to unite without hiding the negative and disruptive consequences of homelessness. In addition, both families and communities can restructure both themselves and their relationships by sharing common stories. In other words, with the help of stories, they can restore the primary conditions of home – its protective and filling shell (Papadopoulos 2002, 33–34).

The fact that stories about the lost Latvia and the time spent there were constantly present in the exile community is well illustrated by the extent to which second-generation exiles are usually able to describe not only the twists and turns of their parents, but also their grandparents as well as places they could only get to know indirectly. In turn, the fact that these stories also played an important role in the formation of these people's sense of belonging is characterized by fragments of a life story of a second-generation exile Latvian living in Great Britain:

> If I go to some city I have never been, for example, Hamburg or New York, I might have seen the pictures before, but it doesn't mean much there. I had also seen many pictures of Latvia and I was told a lot. When your parents are talking about some street [in Latvia], you don't remember what happened there. But then you go and you see this street, and it feels like you are opening a book which you have read but you haven't really understood. And then you start to feel more and see – yes, once my mother may have walked here or my father may have. All the things that were told, they then began to fall into place.

This story, as well as others highlight the important role of intergenerational communication within family in shaping the identity and sense of belonging of second-generation Latvians in exile, as "it is through our embeddedness in the family that the experience of the previous generation is integrated into our own way of

being in the world" (Pickering and Keightley 2012, 119). In the case of exile Latvians, this experience was inseparably connected with the homeland and everything that belonged to it, and it manifested itself or was transmitted through stories, language and emotions. This is also confirmed by the narration of a second-generation exile Latvian interviewed in the USA in which she points out the role of all three elements (language, stories, emotions) in the formation of her identity.

> I am what my parents and what I myself chose to be, and what I feel. And I have always felt like a Latvian. […] I always spoke Latvian at home with my parents. And we very often talking about different topics together at the dinner table, and it was always in Latvian. The Latvian language has always been very dear to me.

As we can see, the older generation's stories about the homeland helped the younger generations to keep in close touch with it, but at the same time these stories have other effects, which have been talked about by anthropologist Ilana Feldman. Using analogies to poetry and music, she defines both stories and rhythmic actions reminiscent of the home experience as refrain, which she believes help refugees (and exiles) not only to stay in touch with home but also to restore the feeling of security even when there is chaos around. She has also pointed out that "with increasing distance, the balance between the material and the narrative in people's relationships to their homes shifted, and the "told" occupied a larger place than the "touched." […] There was never a complete replacement of the tactile though – as the widespread practice of keeping keys to homes long destroyed can attest – but the character of these objects was transformed. However, much people might resist it, these things from home have become more "objects of memory" than "items of use"" (Feldman 2006, 17).

Exile Latvian life stories offer much evidence of the transformation of such everyday objects into objects of memory. However, stories about seemingly very mundane objects, which may have even been taken into exile by chance but have acquired a symbolic meaning over time, seem particularly striking, e.g.:

> I remember so much that we had several household items with us. We still have a meat cutting board – it was taken from Latvia to Germany and here to America. And my mother told me that I will inherit it when she'll die. It is made of Latvian birch wood, and we always put apple bread on it. Mom baked apple bread and always put it on this board. It's a tradition.

Although this may seem like a simple story of a mother who bakes apple bread for her family, it has a deeper meaning as it tells about ritualized activities and shared stories, which most probably took place in parallel with cooking and later at

the family table. It also shows that over time this cutting board has become the object of the family's embodied memories.

Taken altogether, all these refrains of home, combined with other elements (language, common memorial rituals, homeland visits, etc.) made (and still make) some of the second-generation exile Latvians define Latvia as their only home. However, this is and cannot be the only way, because "as time passes and migration becomes an inherited memory rather than a direct one, the imagery of homeland and host country becomes more complex. For descendants of migrants, the 'new' land has never been new in the first place, and the perception and relevance of the 'homeland' […] can be much more fragmented than for those who actually experienced migration" (Stock 2017, 29). However, as the life stories of the NOH collection show, also in the case of first-generation exile Latvians the sense of home and belonging is not perceived as unambiguous and stable, but rather as changeable and even contradictory, largely due to the many years spent in exile and the fact that "people can maintain their emotional attachments to their lost home but, at the same time, develop a sense of home in other places. In other words, home becomes a continuum in which traumatic and positive experiences of 'there', 'here' and 'elsewhere' interact over time and space in the memories, aspirations and actions of the displaced delivered to make a home for themselves" (Murcia 2019, 1528).

Such dual sense of belonging, expressed both directly and indirectly, can often be heard in the life stories of the first-generation of exiles analyzed in this study. Although the emphasis is slightly different in each case, many of these people feel a sense of belonging to both their homeland and their host country. Crucially, such a dual sense of belonging does not mean that the life stories of first-generation exiles lack a painful longing for their place of origin, which can be called nostalgia or, as Reno Papadopoulos has defined it, nostalgic disorientation – "a deep sense of a gap, a fissure, a hole, an absence, a lack of confidence in one's own existence and consequently in 'reading life' which leads to a particular kind of frozenness" (Papadopoulos 2002, 18). Such feelings are evidenced in such statements as "sometimes I feel a real physical pain for Latvia. I have such a longing for Latvia!" (woman living in Great Britain) or "Yes, I have been to [Latvia] several times. But that first experience was the most horrible actually. When I came back [to Sweden], I had extreme depression for about half a year. I felt that here [in Sweden] I am a stranger – it's a foreign land, a foreign language" (woman, living in Sweden). The last quote proves that longing for one's homeland can be felt as a discomfort in the body – body

that feels disconnected from its rightful place (Ahmed 1999, 343). However, the woman's further narrative also reflects that no matter how strong her nostalgic feelings are, Latvia is no longer the place that can function as her home: "When I go to Riga [capital city], I feel – oh, how nice! Extremely warm feeling takes over me. But again... it's not my Riga though. It's different. And when I came back [to Sweden] – yes, probably my fate is to remain here."

This narrative is fully in line with the finding of migration researchers that it is not possible to return to the home/homeland that has remained in the memory of the exiles. Respectively, the journey of the respondent as a refugee has led her only in one direction: even if she returns, she has not reached the same place where she originally came from. From both a physical and an emotional perspective, the place she once called home has changed and is destined to live only in her memories (Gemignani 2011, 132–133). Significantly, that some of the respondents speak quite directly about their awareness that a true return home would require not only a travel in space, but also in time which, as they well understand, is not possible. For this reason, some of them have deliberately chosen never to go to Latvia, e.g.: "I think that my Latvia died at the same time as my youth there. And if you would take me, so to speak, on a golden tray there, ok. But I would do it with great effort as I don't want to ruin my dreams about the Latvia that stayed there! Which died at the same time as my youth."

Exiles are also well aware of the changes in their place identity which have occurred during the prolonged absence from homeland. Thus, the previously quoted woman also reflects on where her home really is – in the place where she found three spruce cones, or the place where most of her life was spent: "Latvia is my homeland. But my home is in the United States, because I've lived here since 1951. I feel safe here. I will die here and I will stay here. Here I have a graveyard, here I have lived. I am very sorry, Latvia is my homeland, but here is my home." Although nostalgia for the lost homeland is clearly felt, the respondent herself defines that the home is no longer there or even in both places, but exclusively in the country of residence, which is the place where her children and grandchildren are raised and where her family has acquired a new place of residence. In addition, her life in the United Stated was spent in a very Latvian environment, by taking part in various cultural and social activities of exile community, which both strengthened her Latvian identity (and helped to transfer it to the next generations) and helped the originally unfamiliar country to become her own.

However, one can find also quite different experience and feelings among the life stories of exile Latvians, as, e.g., the narrative of another woman who have lived most of her life in the United States, but whose only home as she defines it, is still in Latvia:

> One of the things that I consciously tried to do during the whole time of exile was to call the places where I lived the places of my residence, but not homes. That they are not my home, that my real home is my homeland, they are in Latvia. […] My real home is here in Latvia in the sense that I really have the feeling that I own Riga. It's mine. This is my city. And again, when I go to the countryside or the seashore, I feel extremely good, because this is my seashore and it is my forest. The fact that these places are someone else's property doesn't bother me much. That is an abstract concept.

This narrative is noteworthy for at least two reasons. First, it marks a very deliberate, proactive approach aimed at maintaining a sense of home associated with the country of origin alone and avoiding feeling attachment to the country of residence. Secondly, although it may seem that such a pattern of action might rather correspond to the feeling of the first-generation of exiles, this respondent represents the second-generation, which once again confirms how deeply and strongly Latvian identity and belonging to Latvia were transferred to this generation. However, as the life stories of the NOH collection show, the impact of this transfer on the sense of belonging can be differenced. As we saw above, this often caused a kind of imprisonment in a liminal space, being unable to feel at home anywhere; but just as often the effect was the opposite, as evidenced by one of the second-generation respondents living in Great Britain:

> I remember talking to some good friends who were so worried that they couldn't understand who they were. They are not really Latvians. They are not English. Then maybe they travel to Germany, start speaking German and fall in love there, and live in Germany, but they are not real Germans. And for some people, it causes psychological problems that they don't really feel at home anywhere. This has never really been the case for me. […] I don't have such psychological problems. I like both places and when I'm in one, I don't long for the other. It is often the case that I am in England and I think I would like to see and do this and that in Latvia. And when I'm in Riga, I think – oh, that's fine, but in London I still have to do this and that. So I think it's a positive thing. But it depends on the perception.

Obviously, exile Latvians of the second and even third generation, without questioning their Latvian identity, were able to position their sense of home and sense of belonging in very different ways, which was most likely dependent on the individual characteristic traits. Hence, some of these people who experienced the

loss of a home as an intermediate experience are unable to locate it anywhere (the home is completely lost), others feel at home everywhere they go. In the latter case, we can speak of the home as a mobile and symbolic environment or even a journey that no longer conforms to the notions of sedentarism, but rather to the observation that "the second generation of migration experience *emotional transnationalism* which situates them between different generational and locational points of reference – their parents', sometimes also their grandparents', and their own – both the real and the imagined" (Wolf 1997, 459).

Conclusion

In general, life stories of different generations of exile Latvians are consistent with the observation of Luis Eduardo Perez Murcia, a researcher at the University of Manchester, that the ability to rebuild homes does not deny the importance of territorial identity among migrants/exiles; instead, it highlights the different ways in which homes and mobility can interact with each other (Murcia 2019). Indeed, as evident from the experience of both first- and second-generation exiles, homes, even for those for whom they are fixed or rooted in a particular place, are dynamic — associated with changes in time and space, attitudes, and feelings of belonging. As a result, some are neither really separated from the place left in the past, nor really integrated into the current place, while others form a connection to all the places they have inhabited during their life. Significantly, to a large extent it was due to the transfer of memories of the lost homeland and home and intergenerational communication that made possible the formation of such different types of place identity and sense of home in the second and third generation of exiles. Accordingly, even if Latvia is no longer considered one's home, it is still part of their cultural identity (as opposed to place identity).

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